DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 958 CS 205 311

AUTHOR James, E. Nelson
TITLE Literary Magazines--Who Needs Them?
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Associated Collegiate Press (53rd, New Orleans, LA, October 27-29, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anthologies; *Creative Writing; Educational Finance; Financial Support; Higher Education; Journalism; Journalism Education; Literary Criticism; School Publications; *Student Publications
IDENTIFIERS *Literary Magazine

ABSTRACT

Justification for the publication of college literary magazines is offered in this paper. Among the reasons listed for continuing publication are: to fulfill writers' needs to see their work in print, to provide the opportunity for student editors to exercise their critical skills, and to bring enjoyment to readers. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED178958

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
E. Nelson James

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

LITERARY MAGAZINES -- WHO NEEDS THEM?

by E. Nelson James

The topic for this talk, "Literary Magazines -- Who Needs Them?", came from a discussion at the meeting of the NCCPA last fall at the Palmer House in Chicago. One of the advisers questioned the worth of the college literary magazine. Why publish magazines with poems and short stories that lack finish? Wouldn't it be better for these young writers to work and refine their efforts before they're rushed into print?

I looked at him. He was serious, and he didn't look like the barbarians that I had encountered in the student senate as the editors of Towers Magazine and I had gone begging each year for our appropriation from the student activity fund. These meetings which begin at 8:30 at night usually run well into the morning and at about 2:00 a.m. Towers editors get to make their case. They usually follow the editors of The Northern Star, who thoroughly antagonize the senators because the paper won't serve as a puff for the senate. By the time the Towers editors get their turn, the senators are ready to carve the editors and the budget up. Did I say barbarian? They are savage.

On one occasion a senator decided to give nothing to Towers. Why? He was a transfer student, and his former school didn't have a magazine and seemed to get along without it so why should NIU have one? Several other senators joined him, and for a moment it looked as though a publication of almost forty years would fold that night.

Of course, earlier the senate had killed the yearbook on campus. At one time NIU had a beautiful yearbook with three-color spreads and photo-essays. For a while the books got bigger and more elaborate each year. Then the appropriation was cut, and the yearbook staff began to publish magazines. But a year or so of that feeble substitute and the budget was cut to 0, and the yearbook perished.

CS 205311

This year the newspaper has been the target. The senate decided that since the newspaper would not become the voice of the Student Association, the senate would publish its own paper Free Lunch. Free Lunch has a budget of $6,000, but as one of its critics has said, "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

But I have digressed too long perhaps. I just want to remind you that if the literary magazine goes the way of the yearbook (and as I understand NIU is not the only university to give up a yearbook), the next publication to go may be the newspaper.

But let's get back to answer the sincere critic of the literary magazine. Is publication of a magazine an exercise in futility? Are we encouraging novices to rush into print before they are really ready? Are we wasting time of student editors who might better spend it reading the classics? Are we ordering thousands of copies of publications that are taken by students at the distribution tables and are sometimes never even looked at and immediately dumped in a waste basket just around the corner? Oftentimes the editor, who is distributing the magazine, sees such things and turns sick.

Every year we have to justify the magazine to the senate. Towers is published twice each year. And 4,500 copies are printed each time. It follows, therefore, that Towers affects 9,000 students out of 20,000 each year. Each semester a staff of twelve reads carefully a couple of hundred poems, short stories, and essays, and selects about 15 poems, 2 short stories, and 1 piece of literary criticism. All told Towers reaches some 9,500 people. The figure is impressive, but we all know how to lie with statistics. I don't think they would impress the serious critic of literary magazines -- the adviser at the NCCPA meeting of last year.

How to convince him of the worth of these magazines, and more importantly how do we justify ourselves to ourselves? We do need to assess our own purposes

every now and again. I suppose that it is only fitting and proper that we examine first things first before we get down to the practical considerations of writing, editing, publishing, and financing that will be taken up in our sessions of today and tomorrow.

In addressing the question of "Who needs literary magazines?", I submit that the writers need them, the editors need them, the artists need them, the readers need them.

First of all the magazines are for the writers, and let's speak up for them. Sure they are beginners, and maybe they shouldn't be pushed to publish too early; but if they are ready, why shouldn't they try their wings? Alexander Pope published at 12; of course later in life he was to claim that he should not have been pushed and that his youthful indiscretions of the pen should be laid to his sponsors. He, however, probably did not really mean this apology entirely.

I sincerely believe that the poets and fiction writers we are publishing now are much better than those we were publishing in the 1950's. Then we got many romantic love poems in rhyme. Men didn't write for us much then as poetry was considered by some to be a sissy avocation. This semester, as one of the women editors put it, "How long has it been since Towers has published a love poem?" And many of our poets are men.

These young people are dedicated to their craft. They know that writing is not just scribbling something on a piece of notebook paper as an inspiration from the gods, whether Venus or Bacchus. These poets write, revise, refine. They are disciplined. They take creative writing classes and participate in workshops. They read each other's work and criticize it. They give poetry readings, and they listen to professional poets reading their own poetry.

I remember a few years ago on a cold February night--a snowbound night--when about 50 people showed up at our student center for a poetry reading by students. A dozen poets, one after the other, got up and read their poems

to the group. Nobody left until the last poem was read, and we all felt inspired on that occasion.

I know that this goes on at other places too. It happens at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. I once asked Jeff, one of the recipients of the Judson Q. Owen's Graduate Fellowships in Creative Writing, why there were so many good poets at Baylor. I guessed that the creative writing program must be a good one. He said, "Yes, but we like to get together around a camp fire at night and read poetry. We spend many nights like this." The 1970's have seen the return of the minstrels!

These poems are good, and if we can't trust our own judgment, we can believe the testimony of the professional poets. Last spring at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, the central region of Sigma Tau Delta held a convention, at which the noted British poet Stephen Spender read his poems. On the following day he attended a workshop in which he listened to a number of students and faculty members read their own poems. At the end of the readings, Mr. Spender commented on the high quality of the poems and said that many of the poems in the Rectangle were of better quality than those in Poetry (Chicago).

And we have good short story writers also. Two years ago Eudora Welty judged Sigma Tau Delta's Judson Q. Owen Competition, and she said that the fiction of the spring issue was so good that she could hardly make a choice of one of three stories. Camille Mims, University of Alabama at Huntsville, was the recipient, and her chapter sponsor wrote me that she had already received another prize that spring!

The literary critcs are good also. Several years ago Sigma Tau Delta published a John Crowe Ransom issue. Poet-critic John Crowe Ransom was an honor member of Sigma Tau Delta and at that time was very sickly. Ransom was the subject of the Sigma Tau Delta Criticism Competition, and three essays

by undergraduate students were published in the Ransom issue. Although we sent Mr. Ransom a copy of the magazine we did not hear from him directly. But sometime after, a Ransom scholar wrote for a copy of this issue, saying that Ransom himself had told the scholar about the issue.

An article on Kurt Vonegut by Leonard Leff appeared in The Rectangle and it is listed in the bibliography in the book The Vonnegut Statement.

Pulitzer Prize poet Richard Eberhart was the subject of one of our issues, and he himself ordered a dozen copies of the issue. Eberhart was the judge of the Judson Q. Owen Award in 1974. He praised our poets highly and regretted that we gave only one $1,000 prize. In fact he suggested that the prize ought to be divided into three or four smaller cash awards. He said,"When I was a young poet, I would have welcomed such encouragement. All of my awards came too late in my career."

In discussing our young poets I am reminded of the time I heard Maya Angelou speak at the National Council of Teachers of English Convention in Las Vegas. She recited by heart a good many poems by black poets. Suddenly she stopped in the middle of her speech and said, "Why don't you clap? You know they're good!"

So much for the needs of the poets. They need the literary magazines as a forum. And we just don't take anything and everything that comes to us. In Towers we take about one in every dozen poems.

Several years ago my colleague, poet Lucien Stryk,wrote: "The real poet (any artist) is more interested in making good works than in being a 'poet' and he soon finds that in order to do so he must undertake tough and fairly long periods of discipline. The first thing he usually learns is that the serious literary magazine (and it's only such a magazine that should interest him) usually appears a few times a year and publishes around a dozen poems and a half dozen short stories in that period. As it receives hundreds of

poems and stories, it can afford to be selective and usually is."

And that is the kind of magazine I have been associated with. The student editors of Towers have been very careful in their selections of the material that goes in the magazine. They have sought the best in fiction and poetry that has come in. Some poets try and try again and finally make it only on the third or fourth try.

I am convinced that the editors need the magazine. They learn to exercise their critical skills in such a situation. Oftentimes these students feel reverence for a classical writer in their courses. In this situation they don't feel such awe and they can say a thing stinks if they think it does, but they are compelled to say why it does. Just as they have to explain why a poem is good if they think it is. I would have all English majors work on the staff at some time or other, for such work is good practice in criticism.

Former editors of Towers are in teaching, in graduate school in English and Radio-TV, in editing, in school publications. I am sure the experience in editing has helped them. A recent editor has a fellowship in creative writing at Massachusetts.

How many artists we have benefited I don't know. Artists are more blasé than poets and pretend not to care, but I think that some of them have been helped by having Towers in their portfolio.

The readers have benefited from the magazine across the years. Some of my favorite readers are strangers to campus. A Chicago woman bought Towers at a bookstore in the city. She liked it so much that she wrote to become a subscriber. Flattered, we've sent her copies ever since.

Or there's the teacher of oral interpretation of literature up in Faribalt, Minnesota, who got a hold of a copy of Towers, and gave it to his students to read aloud. Ever since, he has been on our mailing list. He claims that

his high school students prefer our poets to the professional poets. Maybe it's because our poets are closer to these high school students in time.

But some students on campus come to appreciate poetry through the literary magazines. One of the Rectangle editors recently took a number of student poems into a freshman composition and literature class. The class became so excited over several of the poems that the discussion had to be continued until the next day. An upperclassman standing outside the door bounded in at the end of the period and ran up to the teacher saying he had heard that poem through the open door and thought it was great and where could he get a copy of it. The spirit was infectious, and my colleague, who is a Yeats specialist, was delighted with the whole experience.

I suppose that if the truth were known, I am selfish and perhaps I need the magazines most of all. I do like to see young things grow as does Dolly in The Matchmaker. I do enjoy the thrill of seeing a number of talented people working together to make a magazine: writer, editor, artist, printer. After 30 years it is still a thrill to see it all work from manuscript to galleys to page proof to silver print to finished book. Every year has been different, and they have all been interesting and some years have been thrilling and others have been great.

Sometimes I think we should answer the churlish question of who needs literary magazines in a regal manner. I'd like to try Shakespeare on our savage critic in the Senate, but I guess he wouldn't really understand King Lear. You'll remember Lear made the big mistake of giving away his estate to his daughters before he died. All they were to do was to keep him and his retinue of 100 knights. The daughters before a month's time try to whittle the retinue down to 50 then finally to one. He answers them:

"O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars are in the poorest thing superfluous; allow not nature more than nature needs, man's life is cheap as beast's.

Thou art a lady; If only to go warm were gorgeous, why, Nature needs not what thou gorgeous wearest, which scarcely keeps thee warm."

--Lear, Act II, Scene II, 52.

Lear's 100 knights, the daughter's gorgeous clothes, literary magazine--O reason not the need--we just do need them, or maybe better still to answer our detracious with some scripture..."man does not live by bread alone."